

Unseen victims of unfinished city

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Introduction:

The Lavasa project near Pune in Maharashtra, formerly hailed as India's first hill metropolis, has been abandoned due to years of regulatory and financial difficulties. Aside from individuals who invested in the project, the impact of the now-defunct town can be felt in adjacent towns, where residents are still fighting to reclaim land that was seized for the project.

Lavasa is billed as a site that will offer a quality of life to its planned 300,000 residents and attract tourists, based on the concepts of new urbanism, where shops, houses, workplaces, and recreational facilities are all within walking distance of one another. The hill city's promoters, Lavasa Corporation Limited, broke rules, violated regulations, and disregarded environmental laws while creating it, as seen by the postcard photographs. Lavasa will take up around 5,000 hectares along the borders of seven hills in the Western Ghats' Sahyadri range. Its shoreline, supplied by the backwaters of the Warasgaon dam on the River Mose, is its distinctive selling point.

History and details of lavasa project:

Construction at Lavasa was in full swing until November 25 of 2013, when the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) intervened and issued a stop-work order and notice to Lavasa Corporation Limited (LCL), which is largely owned by Hindustan Construction Company. The reason for this was that the corporation had been unable to acquire environmental approval from the Union ministry. It had gone through based on Maharashtra's environment department's approval.

The ministry's Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) for new infrastructure projects and the Coastal Regulation Zone indicated in the first week of March that the project's

Reference:

1. Mongabaonlinenews article, <https://india.mongabay.com/2019/10/the-invisible-victims-of-an-unfinished-city/>.
2. Down to earth, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/lavasa-exposed-33282>

planning and development should be modified, and its environmental impact reviewed again. Simultaneously, the ministry proposed that permission be granted to finish the semi-finished buildings being constructed as villas and apartments. It was made clear that buildings that did not reach the plinth level should not be permitted. The decision to legalise illegal structures runs counter to the ministry's conclusions during the last four months.

the ministry had halted work and formed the committee in response to a public interest suit filed in Mumbai's high court by the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), a coalition of activists and non-governmental organisations. Lavasa filed a high court challenge to the ministry's ruling, claiming that it had obtained all necessary approvals from the state and that the government had no jurisdiction over the project. In person, environment minister Jairam Ramesh and two ministry employees were mentioned in the petition.

The committee's report, dated January 13, confirms the violations of environmental laws, including haphazard cutting of hills. On February 1, LCL submitted for post facto approval from the MoEF for the first phase of the project; Lavasa is being constructed in two phases of 2,000 and 3,000 acres each. The company maintained that it had already spent nearly Rs 3,000 crore on the project and that investors had secured third-party rights in the city while seeking authorization from the government. The initiative has provided jobs and development to a previously underdeveloped area, like lcl said.

People related issues:

Over the past 10-15 years, the project, which was billed as India's first private hill metropolis, has been mired in a series of issues including land acquisition and a lack of environmental permits. It's a ghost town, with ready-to-move-in apartments that are empty, incomplete construction, or structures that have been vacated by their tenants.

Villagers who gave up their land for Lavasa have been protesting the project for numerous years, accusing it of duping them and defrauding them of their property. They point out that, just as people and life in general are missing in the ghost town of Lavasa, the afflicted persons and their needs may be invisible to the authorities.

The city was built on 25,000 acres in 18 villages in Mulshi Taluka, about 50-55 kilometres from Pune. However, the project has been accused of usurping villagers' land and breaking environmental regulations on multiple occasions over the years. The project ran out of steam as a result of the obstacles.

The town is deteriorating, and the signs can be seen everywhere. Throughout the village, there are abandoned and unfinished structures. For example, the Fortune hotel in Lavasa, which had been open for many years, suddenly closed. Human presence is infrequent, with the exception of a couple of guards who are responsible for thousands of square metres of property.

An official from Hindustan Construction Company, which founded Lavasa, refused to comment, claiming that the project is now being investigated by the NCLT and that the company is unable to comment on the project's concerns.

Tanaji Margale, a resident of Dudhwan village, one of the 18 villages where land for the Lavasa project was purchased. "Land was acquired from our village, Dudhwan, as well for the Lavasa project. But still, there are people who are living in the village and need basic facilities. No one hears our demand for basic facilities like a road to our village or drinking water. To reach our village, one has to climb the hill for at least three kilometres from the motorable road," Margale, who is a farmer and still holds land in Dudhwan village, told Mongabay-India.

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"We do not exist for the administration. There are agents who threaten us to give up our land stating that the government will anyways never give them any facilities. They killed our hills and damaged the forests and the water facilities. Elections or no elections no one including the politicians is bothered about us. They know our number is small and that is why our votes are of no consequence to them," said Margale.

This project was excellent, and everyone did an excellent job, however since the project was cancelled, everyone has lost their jobs. But there is no work today," said Sharad Patil, who used to work as a civil works supervisor when the city's development was at its peak.

In September 2019, Mongabay-India paid a visit to the area and met with various villagers who had lost their land to the project and those who had battled to reclaim it. "The company (Lavasa) displaced my family from our ancestral land and our forests but it could not deter us from fighting for justice. We were ready to lose our life but not the land. We fought them and ensured that our rights are secured our land back from him. None of us gave the land. Our fight ensured that other villagers do not face a poor fate," Villager Leela Bai of Mugaon told Mongabay-India.

Mugaon was one of the 18 villages where the Lavasa project's next phase of development was supposed to take place before things went wrong. Several incomplete buildings still stand empty near Mugaon today. There are also a few fields where construction materials were dumped without the authorization of the farmers.

Kondiba, a Mugaon village farmer, stated his family lost their land and no one came to their aid. "We have no idea how our land (about 8.5 acres), which was in our father's name, was taken away. They even dumped construction material on our fields. We are today forced to earn by doing labour and dairy work to run our lives. There is no construction taking place right now but even if it starts, we won't go anywhere as this is our ancestral land," said Kondiba,

There have been numerous instances where agents have acquired farmers' land without providing adequate compensation or under the guise of falsified documentation. nother inhabitant of Mugaon village, Gangaram Margale, is still defending his land matter in court. "We had agreed to sell four acres but the agents cheated us and took all our 14 acres of land. We never got our compensation. Though I am fighting the case, I have to depend on labour work to sustain our life," Margale

The locals even mentioned incidents in which someone who died in the early 1990s was found to have signed papers for selling land in the 2000s. Laxman Kokhre, who owned 14 acres of land, said they don't know who paid them for it. "Our land was shown to have been bought from someone else and compensation money was given to them. We don't even have money to file a case," said Kokhre, who is now working in fields of other farmers to earn a living.

Suniti S.R. of the National Alliance of People's Movement, who worked on the Lavasa issue with the project's affected people in the valley, told Mongabay-India that the Lavasa project had an impact on hundreds of farmers and tribal people in the area.

"A total of 1.08 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) water was allotted to the Lavasa company for their Lake City Project itself even when Pune was facing drinking water shortage. Farmers lost fertile agricultural land in Varasgaon Dam for 'public purpose', which was given to Lavasa on lease. Land of a lot of farmers was fraudulently taken away from them. There were so many environmental irregularities as well. We succeeded in stopping the project at 2,000 hectares which was proposed to be on over 10,000 hectares. We also regained around 94 hectares of tribal land grabbed by the project," "Their Special planning authority was cancelled by which they were violating town planning and environment laws and rules. Now it is facing bankruptcy and is reportedly looking for buyers. Now is the time to struggle for the village-based, sustainable development with the local people's participation, and we are focusing our efforts to that

effect for issues like education, health and drinking water. Their struggle continues," said Suniti.

Environmental issues:

Y.P. Singh, a former Indian Police Service (IPS) officer and now a lawyer, told Mongabay-India that the initiative was doomed to fail. "The city is a flop because the concept was not correct from the beginning. There was this basic problem of accessibility and connectivity because of the remoteness of the area. There were numerous issues about environmental violations as well," said Singh, who had exposed environmental breaches in the project a few years earlier. People had pointed out uncontrolled hill cutting, construction of structures too close to water sources, and coercive acquisition of tribal people's land as examples of environmental infractions in the project.

Laws violated from the project:

Lavasa has also broken the law. Its proposal does not follow the procedures outlined in the Maharashtra Regional and Town Planning Act of 1966, which include soliciting public input and gaining state government approval. There is no approved landscape plan, parking and circulation plan, or

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baseline environmental information within and surrounding the site, according to the MoEF's site inspection report.

The city's master plan, which was approved by the Pune collector in 2006, is essentially a 580-hectare layout plan. LCL amended this after the state government appointed it as a Special Planning Authority (SPA) in June 2008. This gave LCL the authority to approve its own plans.

The developer changed the layout designs after obtaining the powers of a planning authority. Construction on steep slopes is prohibited under hill station restrictions. As a result, LCL shifted the majority of the development in the valley. The original hill station regulation only allowed for two-story constructions; Lavasa structures had six. The floor space index (FSI) of the structures that would have risen up on the hills was transferred to the buildings in the valley. "They have almost quadrupled the floor space in 80 percent residential area by interpreting the global (floating) FSI to their benefit," claims a Pune town planning officer.

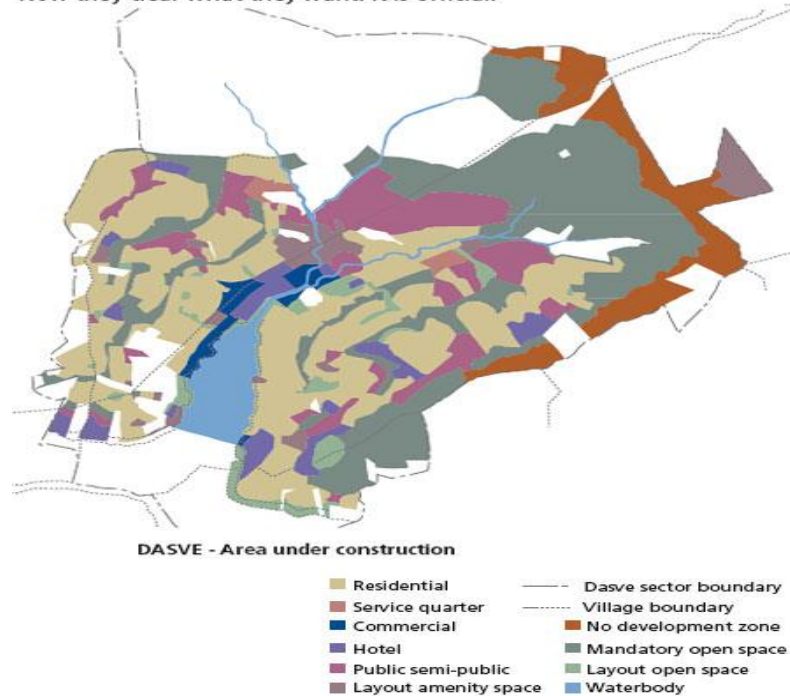
Another major planning flaw is that the structures are so close to the lake that they are virtually touching it. The state government originally allowed LCL to develop at a distance of 50 metres from the reservoir, which was then decreased to 30 metres and finally 15 metres. At the construction site, the concrete pavement comes dangerously close to touching the reservoir. According to reports, the developer reclaimed land from the reservoir's bank. According to the MoEF's site report, all of this could have a harmful influence on the water body's flora and wildlife.

The Maharashtra Krishna Valley Development Corporation, the state's water resources department, had leased 141.15 hectares to LCL for checkdam construction. LCL built commercial and residential buildings on a section of the leased land that was above the submergence zone.

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Lavasa authorised to sanction its own plans
Special planning authority created with Lavasa officials as members.
Now they clear what they want. It is official.



Residential: Laws changed to allow construction on steep slopes. Height of apartment buildings increased from Ground (G)+1 to G+4, some adjacent to water body.

Commercial: Laws changed to allow mixed land use—commercial and residential—in the town centre. Height of buildings was increased from G+2 to G+5, which was illegal in the original hill station policy

Water: Check dam at the mouth of Dasve. Buildings and roads close to the water body, at 5 to 15 metre distance. Oil and sludge from vehicles and runoff could affect lake's water quality. Land reclaimed to set up the waterfront commercial area Lavasa's population density is likely to be 4000 persons/sq km

Hospital: No plans for disposal of bio-medical waste on-site. Biomedical waste to be transported but no studies done on its impact.

Conclusion:

We should put the Environment first since the oxygen we use is from the trees. Without any trees, our world would be dull and everyone would find it hard to live. All the animals that live within the trees would have no home which would cause them to infest our houses.

People needed place to stay, it may be important. But there is an different between using by needs and using by existence. Just because the place is existed, we can use it is an unnecessary action.

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